

SB 374

March 7, 2013

Dear Members of the Public Health Commission:

I am writing to submit testimony about SB 374. I am a parent of two boys, one who is in the Newtown Public Schools and one who suffered extreme mental health issues while in the Newtown Public Schools, but is now in an appropriate placement and has done a complete turnaround in a private school at our expense. I am also a public school educator.

While I very much appreciate the intent of this bill, I feel in some ways it goes way too far and in others it does not go far enough. I desperately needed help for my son and attempted to use the due process system currently in place. Not only was it extremely expensive and time-consuming, it was ineffective and caustic for my son and my family. I won a partial agreement the first time 07-104 where the school district was required to do a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA). That sounds great, however, the school district did not implement the findings of the FBA and my son continued to suffer. When it was clear that they were not able to meet his needs, they would hide information from me and fought at all costs to keep him in an "inclusion" setting, when that was clearly not benefitting him and was also effecting the rest of the students in the class. My son became more and more depressed and anxious and his behavior and academics continued to suffer resulting in more refusals of the district to do what was clearly needed in his case.

At one point when he was in eighth grade, my son insisted on coming to the PPT. He attempted to advocate for himself and told the team exactly what he felt he needed: to be taught in the library 1:1 by a teacher because he couldn't hear in the classroom (we learned later that he has damage to his brain stem most likely due to a brain injury he suffered as a newborn from severe pathological jaundice (hyperbilirubinemia). The director of special education looked directly at him and told him that he didn't really think that, but that his mom was just telling him to say that. Another staff member explained to him that he didn't really think that and then he attempted once again to advocate for himself by saying that he felt he was being manipulated. The next day, my son saw the special education director in the hallway and began having explosive diarrhea for four months which was so severe that we had to put him on medication. The meeting resulted in another 4-day due process hearing which ended up being thrown out because I had refused to allow the school to provide special education services because of the damage (emotionally) that their version of services were causing him. Ultimately, we pulled him out of the schools at our own expense and he is now thriving, as I said above. He is on the honor roll and will graduate successfully from high school and will go on to college. He has asked us as his parents for a four year commitment so that he never had to return to the Newtown Public Schools.

My question about this bill is how will this help children like my son? I spoke to so many other parents and their stories were so similar to mine. How can an assessment help a child? What accountability is in place to ensure that school districts are following through with what they are

supposed to do for students. Was this done in the case with Adam Lanza or was Nancy's story similar to mine?

Also, the last thing I want as a parent is for a school system who failed my son so miserably because they did not know or did not want to meet his needs, to have the power to do a mental health assessment on him. Clearly, I as his parent, know what it is best for him. I take his mental health very seriously.

Then there is that issue. I found the school my son goes to purely by luck. I found the doctors that ultimately ended up helping by chance. It took incredible effort on my part. Why does it have to be that hard?

Please rewrite this bill to include checks and balances, accountability for school districts and ways for parents to choose what is right for their child while also being able to access appropriate information about ways their child can be supported.

Certainly you are aware that parents in Newtown were asking for help from the State Department of Education prior to the shooting incident. Our concerns were ignored. Please do not ignore us any longer. My hope is that all children will be able to be well, mentally, socially and academically. We need legislation that supports this.

Sincerely,

Laura Main
Newtown, CT